

Education in the South: A Passport to Opportunity

Strategic Communications Plan for Kentucky



A Blueprint for Reaching At-Risk Youth and their Influencers
on the Importance of Graduating from High School
Ready for Postsecondary Education and Work

Presented by the Southern Governors' Association

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In implementing the *Education in the South: A Passport to Opportunity* grant, the Southern Governors' Association (SGA), under the leadership of its 2005-06 Chairman, Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, partnered with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), an organization that was also chaired by Governor Blanco during this grant period.

To assist grantee states, SGA also enlisted the services of:

- GMMB, a strategic communications firm with expertise in changing behaviors on issues ranging from education to health.
- Smarty Pants, a research strategy firm specializing in youth-focused marketing.

Executive Summary

In past generations, when the South was largely rural—and agriculture and manufacturing the largest sources of jobs—finishing high school and graduating prepared for college were less common and less necessary for jobs that would support a family.¹ But today's South is different—economically, demographically, and culturally. Increasingly, employment in the new South demands advanced thinking skills and lifelong learning.² Although governors and other state leaders are committed to ensuring that high schools evolve to meet these new needs, significant challenges still exist. Too many parents and students are unaware of how the world has changed, how the job market has evolved in the last few decades, and that a more rigorous education is necessary in order to succeed in the 21st century.³ Research also indicates that many high school students do not take the courses they need to be prepared for college. Graduation rates in the South are lower than the national average and declined from 1991 to 2002 in 10 of the 15 Southern Governors' Association (SGA) states.⁴

As part of a broader effort to improve graduation and college readiness rates throughout the region, the SGA, with support from the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, created *Education in the South: A Passport to Opportunity*. The initiative provides nine southern states, including Kentucky, with the tools and resources needed to communicate with students at risk of dropping out of high school—and their influencers, including parents, community leaders, and peers—about the critical need to graduate ready for college and work.

This blueprint for an integrated communications effort aims to help Kentucky communicate with students at risk of dropping out of high school and their influencers about the importance of: 1) staying in school; 2) taking rigorous courses and/or completing a core or default curriculum; and 3) graduating from high school prepared to succeed in college, the work world, and life.

Situation Analysis

Kentucky has made a clear commitment to improving student achievement and implementing education reform, taking important steps to raise standards and promote rigorous course taking. The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA) initiated far-reaching, systematic reform in K-12 in the areas of finance, governance, and curriculum. Reforms included a statewide school accountability system, a shift to school-based decision making, multi-age classrooms in kindergarten through third grade, a more equitable system of school funding, and the creation of Family Resource and Youth Service Centers throughout the state. In 2001, the Kentucky Board of Education adopted a strategic plan to reach its goal of enabling all schools and students to be proficient by 2014. Starting in 2007-08, all juniors will take the American College Test (ACT).

In 2000, the General Assembly specifically addressed Kentucky's dropout rate with KRS 158.145, which mandated that, by 2006, the statewide annual dropout rate would be half that of 2000 and that no school would have an annual dropout rate greater than 5 percent. As Kentucky works toward reaching these goals, the state's participation in the

Passport initiative is just one more example of steps taken to ensure that Kentucky students are graduating from high school ready for college or work.

Though there have been significant efforts to raise standards and increase achievement, considerable gains must still be made. The statewide dropout rate for the 2004-2005 school year was nearly 3.5 percent; more recent reports from the Kentucky Auditor show that number could be closer to 4.7 percent. The official state graduation rate was 82.8 percent. In 2005, the dropout rate for the state's largest school district, Jefferson County, was more than 7 percent, according to data from the Kentucky Department of Education, and the graduation rate was 74.7%. Dropout rates for African American and Hispanic students continue to be greater than those of White students.

The state has built a solid foundation on which to launch a campaign targeting youth at risk of dropping out of high school and their influencers. The *Passport* initiative will build on the tools and resources already in place through Go Higher, Partnership for Successful Schools/Kentucky Scholars program, GEAR UP, and others.

Key Elements of Kentucky's *Passport* Communications Effort

This plan:

- Uses existing research to fine tune core messages that best resonate with young people and their influencers
- Integrates core messages into targeted and appropriate communications tools
- Leverages earned media outreach to reach *Passport* influencers and stakeholders
- Builds and expands partnerships with state and local organizations that have the greatest potential to effectively reach young people as well as their influencers
- Uses an online portal like GoHigherKY.org to offer compelling and relevant tools, resources, and other supports to at-risk youth, their families, and other influencers
- Provides guidance on evaluating progress and outcomes of communication activities continuously and rigorously

Communications Goals

The integrated *Passport* communications initiative aims to support Kentucky's existing effort to improve high school graduation and college-readiness rates by:

- Raising awareness among at-risk youth and their key influencers of the critical value of graduating from high school ready for college and work
- Informing at-risk youth about the availability of online portals and other support resources
- Increasing the number of students who seek tools and resources such as advisers, counselors, and other staff, to help increase the rigor of their course loads
- Increasing the number of state and local leaders who are committed and actively working to support young people in their effort to graduate from high school ready for the future

Over the long term, this plan aims to support efforts to foster a statewide commitment to creating a “culture of achievement” for all young people.

***It is important to note that this communications plan equates success with a change in attitudes and behaviors; it is only one part of the process to help solve the multifaceted challenge of improving graduation and college readiness rates.*

The Approach: Reaching At-Risk Youth and Their Influencers in Kentucky

In an effort to provide Kentucky with a blueprint from which to coordinate and implement a manageable and measurable integrated communications and outreach strategy, we recommend that this plan be rolled out over three phases using the key elements explained earlier.

The following section outlines how Kentucky can implement a three-phase *Passport* initiative, focusing on specific regions and/or schools to reach youth, influencers, and potential partners and then to build on existing activities and expand to new areas. (For additional details, see Figure 1 on page 6.)

Three-Phase Timeline

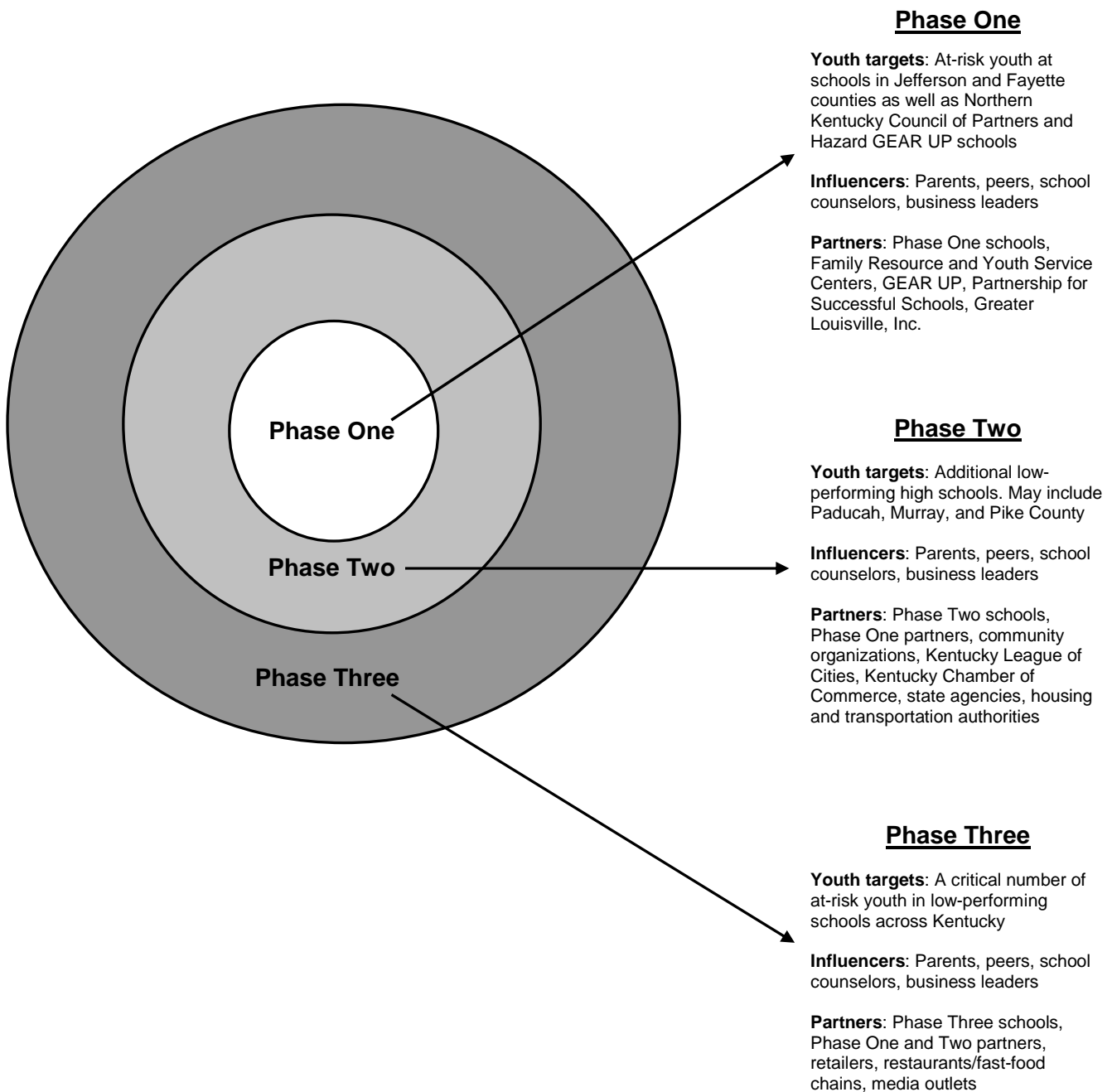
In order for Kentucky to implement a communications strategy that is manageable in scope and produces measurable results, the state should roll out the effort **in three distinct phases**:

- **Phase One: Kentucky will pilot the effort** in specific areas of the state with a strong GEAR UP program, an active P-16 council, a willing business, government and/or post-secondary partner, and an effective Family Resource/Youth Service Center. **Target areas include Jefferson and Fayette counties and collaborations with the Northern Kentucky Council of Partners in Education (including Boone, Bracken, Campbell, Gallatin, Grant, Kenton, and Pendleton counties) and the GEAR UP area coordinated by Hazard Community and Technical College (schools primarily in Perry and Knott counties).** Ideal partners and messengers include parents, counselors, the faith community, and business leaders. Ideally, Kentucky will use this phase to establish benchmarks of success (the number of students visiting the Web site, the number of students working with counselors to increase the rigor of their course load, etc.) and conduct ongoing evaluation to track progress in reaching the target audience. This phase can serve as a pilot, offering a model for statewide replication and expansion of effective tactics and messages.
- **Phase Two:** We recommend that Kentucky expand the initiative's reach and replicate successful tactics and messages from Phase One to communicate with **additional high schools across the state with similar performance challenges.** Potential areas could include Murray, Paducah, and Pike County, among others. The goal of Phase Two is to broaden the initiative's geographic reach and expand the number of partners to include groups like the United Way or Big Brothers/Big Sisters, which can plan grassroots activities to reach students and their influencers through meaningful, one-on-one communications. By working with state agencies and other organizations, like the Kentucky League of

Cities or the local transit authority, Kentucky has the potential to reach families with *Passport* messages through an expanded number of venues.

- **Phase Three:** We recommend that Kentucky plan a full range of proven outreach tactics for a **statewide communications effort**. The goal of this phase is to reach a critical number of low-performing and at-risk youth throughout the state. This phase incorporates a range of activities—including sustainable partnerships with businesses, community organizations, faith congregations, and the media—to foster one-on-one communications as well as broader dissemination of the core messages.

Figure 1 – Implementing Kentucky’s Passport Effort in Three Phases



Tools to Support the *Passport* Initiative

To support this work, SGA will distribute a *Passport* Action Toolkit in early 2007. With template communications and creative materials, how-to guides and other resources, this toolkit aims to provide guidance and assistance for implementing this effort.

***A Passport to Opportunity:* Strategies and Tactics for Kentucky's *Passport* Communications Effort**

Communicating with high school aged youth about the importance of graduating, especially students at risk of dropping out of school, is especially challenging. Instead of relying on traditional media such as television and newspapers for their news, young people are more likely to turn to their peers, trusted advisers, and an ever-expanding universe of new media channels for information and direction. To reach at-risk students and their influencers, a *Passport* communications initiative must be rooted in activities that reach young people in relevant and meaningful ways—placing the highest priority on one-on-one communications activities.

In order to motivate at-risk students to take advantage of the tools available to help them graduate from high school ready for postsecondary education and the work world, the state should implement a **comprehensive and integrated communications strategy**. This approach will allow Kentucky to reach target students and their influencers with consistent and relevant messages through a variety of communications vehicles, building on existing efforts to improve high schools and high school instruction statewide.

Utilize existing research to understand the target audience and messengers. The success of an integrated communications strategy hinges upon Kentucky's understanding of the target audience. Given that numerous barriers—both personal and environmental—impede effective communications with at-risk students, GMMB compiled existing research on and from young people before developing the *Passport* messages and this communications strategy.

Qualitative and quantitative research can help Kentucky plan the expansion of a *Passport* effort and help determine the best way to reach at-risk students and their influencers. Research can also help identify effective communications vehicles and trusted student influencers, helping to prioritize partner outreach and activities. We recommend that the state hold informal focus groups with students from three to four pilot schools in Phase One to inform this plan's recommendations. The Youth Discussion Guide included in the toolkit provides suggested questions and topic areas for discussion and can be used as a resource to facilitate these groups.

Use core messages to develop communications tools. Effective communications efforts are rooted in core messages. The campaign will be driven by the following messages, tailored to speak directly to Kentucky youth and their influencers, building awareness of the effort and motivating them to act. These core messages will help shape the tone and direction of the entire communications campaign, informing the development of everything from creative concepts to partner outreach materials.

Messages for At-Risk Youth

- **You control your future.** Challenge yourself to graduate from high school. Take the core curriculum and use your Individual Learning Plan to chart a rigorous course and you will be better prepared for college, work, and the future. The payoff is bigger than a paycheck. By graduating, you will earn the respect of your family and community.

- **You may think graduating from high school will be hard, but stick it out—help is available.** Your community—your friends, parents, teachers, coaches, faith leaders, and local leaders—wants to you succeed. Take advantage of free resources like counselors, mentors, Family Resource and Youth Service Centers, and on-line tools such as GoHigherKY.org—even the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship—so you can graduate with options for the future.
- **Dropping out of high school could be a million-dollar decision.** The average high school dropout earns \$337,000 less than a high school graduate over his or her lifetime and \$1.5 million less than a college graduate.
- **Don't limit your options by dropping out.** By graduating from high school, you'll be prepared for success in work and college. Most jobs—including those in industry and retail—require the same skills and knowledge you need to graduate. Without these critical thinking and analytical skills, your job options will be limited, your pay will be lower, and it will be more difficult to support yourself and your family.

Messages for Influencers (e.g., teachers, parents, mentors, and coaches)

- **Times have changed. Graduating from high school with strong reading and math skills is now necessary for success in work and life.** In the last few decades, the nature of work and the types of jobs available in Kentucky has changed dramatically. Most jobs in today's global economy—including those in manufacturing, industry, and retail—require specific technical skills and knowledge only attained with at least a high school diploma. When a student drops out of high school, they miss critical lessons and technical training, and, as a result, higher-paying jobs.
- **Dropping out of high school limits students' future options.** We all want the best for our children and hope that, as adults, they will have the ability to support themselves and their family. But in today's job market, young people's job options are limited if they don't have a high school diploma. It will be especially difficult to make ends meet.
 - **Dropping out of high school could be a million-dollar decision.** The average high school dropout earns \$337,000 less than a high school graduate over their lifetime and \$1.5 million less than a college graduate.
 - **Studies show that adults who drop out of high school** are less likely to be able to afford health treatments and **report being in poorer health than college graduates**. And they are more likely to serve time: In 1997, more than half of prison inmates had not graduated from high school.
- **We must support all students so they believe: graduating with strong skills and knowledge is possible and critical to their future.** As parents, community leaders, and trusted advisors for young people, we have a responsibility to challenge and support *all* students to stay in high school—encouraging them to achieve and graduate ready for postsecondary education and the work world. A commitment of time, know-how, and support is one of the most important

investments we can make in the health and well-being of our students, families, and community.

It is important to note that the messages and outreach tactics presented in this plan are meant to complement and support significant communications and education-related activities already underway in Kentucky.

Form state and local partnerships that effectively reach youth and their influencers. By building partnerships with state and local organizations, Kentucky can broaden *Passport's* reach. With a strong coalition of partners, including trusted advisers who have the ability to communicate directly with at-risk youth, their families, and other influencers, the state can expand awareness of the tools, including sites like GoHigherKY.org, designed to help students graduate ready for postsecondary education and the work world.

While it takes time, creativity, persistence, and enthusiasm to build successful partnerships, Kentucky will see an enormous payoff. With the help of a broad range of partners serving as the effort's front-line ambassadors and carrying campaign messages to the target audiences through a variety of organized efforts—from grassroots to "grass tops"—the state will have the strongest potential for real, one-on-one engagement with at-risk youth.

Examples of potential partners:

- Educational organizations and schools
- Community-based organizations and youth advocates
- Faith community leaders and their congregations
- Businesses at the state and local levels with strong civic engagement and a commitment to the issue
- State agencies that reach or serve at-risk youth, their families, and influencers
- Media outlets that reach or resonate with youth and their influencers, as well as their parent companies

Once partnerships have been formed, it will be important to recognize the partners' ongoing contributions to the campaign. This can be achieved through certificates of appreciation, logos on appropriate signage and inclusion in media activities, including identifying partner representation as spokespeople and attributing quotes in press releases.

Conduct earned media outreach to reach *Passport* influencers and stakeholders. It will be important throughout the life of the campaign to generate media coverage to reach influencers, potential partners, and other stakeholders. In addition to any news stories garnered as a result of a campaign launch event (see page 13), the state should continuously reach out to important education contacts at key print, radio, television, and online outlets to update them on campaign activities and newsworthy developments, successes, new partners, and other information. Activities could include:

- **Coordinate editorial board meetings with state and local newspapers.** Editorial boards meet on a regular basis to discuss current news and select topics for editorial, which reflect the collective opinion of the editors. Editorials can be an excellent vehicle to motivate stakeholders and potential partners to

actively support the effort, expand awareness of the *Passport* initiative more broadly, and create a buzz.

- **Identify a top influencer within the campaign to draft an op-ed** explaining the need for the *Passport* initiative and the resources available to at-risk students. Ideally, this person would be a community or business leader with strong name recognition, a record of civic involvement, and credibility on the issue of education. This individual can underscore the importance of education in developing a talented workforce or the role of the business community in partnering with education leadership on the issue.
- **Encourage members of the *Passport* initiative to submit letters to the editor** to express their thoughts on Kentucky's drop out prevention techniques and spark ongoing conversations with other readers and writers. This tactic is most successful when tied to a published news story.
- **Identify news stories** and reach out to key education reporters—including newspaper, TV, online, and radio reporters—at the state and community level when new information is available. Schedule one-on-one interviews with identified spokespeople or students directly affected by the issue to keep high school dropouts top of mind with reporters

How-to's and other documents for communicating with the media and maximizing earned media efforts are included in the toolkit.

Incorporate *Passport* messages into a Web portal. Research shows that the Internet is fast becoming the No. 1 information source for most Americans. This trend is even more pervasive among teenagers, the primary audience of the *Passport* communications initiative.

Teenagers are frequent and regular consumers of new media⁵; they form blogging communities, surf the Internet, and text message their friends. Because teenagers, especially those at risk of dropping out, rely so heavily on new media to communicate, Kentucky's campaign should incorporate *Passport* messages into a Web portal or utilize other new media such as text messaging or pod casting for message delivery.

GoHigherKY.org will be a **critical component of the *Passport* initiative, offering an interactive resource** where students can go to explore interests and career options and learn about the educational requirements they will need to get the job they want. We recommend that Kentucky integrate *Passport* core messages into GoHigherKY.org to make the site relevant to the campaign's target audience. This could be achieved through a *Passport*-specific tab that provides *Passport* tools and materials to the at-risk student population. More specific recommendations for pre-launch Web content are included on page 12.

Alternatively, the state could develop a "ghost page" that relates more directly to the overall creative campaign (such as UnlimitKY.org or StickItOutKY.org). The ghost page would be accessed through the alternate URL, but would automatically direct students to the GoHigherKY.org portal.

Because the site allows students to create personal profiles (myGoHigher) to track their grades and activities, it should also function as an indicator of success for the communications campaign, with the goal of increasing both the number of total visitors and students in each target district who have created myGoHigher accounts on the site.

Evaluate progress and outcomes continuously and vigorously. Candid and ongoing evaluation of a communications campaign is a necessary part of the process and critical for its success. Rigorous assessment will provide Kentucky with important guidance for expanding and/or improving specific elements and activities of the *Passport* initiative. Closely monitoring Phase One activities is particularly critical to the success of communications efforts because these findings will be used to inform the actions of Phases Two and Three and help ensure the entire initiative's success. Findings from periodic research and evaluation can also help keep partners engaged and aware of the progress of their efforts.

Because an increase in annual promotion or graduation rates of a cohort can be difficult to link back to a communications campaign alone, Kentucky should evaluate short-term measures, including overall awareness of campaign messages and available resources, use of communications vehicles, and utilization of support services promoted in communications materials.

Assessment measurements could include:

- Increasing the number of total visitors and the number of students in each target school who have created personal accounts at GoHigherKY.org. In addition, polls and surveys can probe users to help the state identify which communications activities are driving students to the online portal.
- Measuring the number of partners and level of engagement. Are partner activities reaching those students most at risk of dropping out and are these activities driving students to take action?
- Quantifying the number of students who take advantage of free resources (such as counselors and others) to help increase the rigor of their course loads and plan for the future. Qualitative or quantitative surveys with counselors, teachers, and parents can help to determine which activities have been effective and what information or resources would be helpful in the future.
- Administering student surveys throughout the *Passport* campaign to determine awareness of campaign messages and the effectiveness of creative executions. Moreover, Kentucky should consider surveying Web site users to determine how they found out about the site, what information is most useful, and changes Kentucky could make to the site.

Phase One: Pre-Launch Activities, Campaign Launch and Pilot Site Rollout

The first phase of the campaign will serve as a **pilot** to test the effectiveness of campaign messages and communications tools and tactics with the target audience to ensure that messages resonate and students take action. Key measures of success in the pilot phase will be based on communications goals, including an increase in

awareness of the campaign messages, an increase in the number of students from the pilot schools who create personal profiles online, and an increase in the number of students who take advantage of available graduation advisers and school counselors to make their course loads more rigorous. Effective tactics and activities in Phase One will serve as models for replication and expansion in Phases Two and Three.

Pre-launch Activities

Pre-launch activities will lay the groundwork for the entire campaign and include:

- **Message testing:** We recommend that Kentucky **conduct research to test core messages and communications vehicles through informal focus groups with students at select pilot schools**. In addition, the groups can further identify where students get their information and how they spend their free time. This insight will help Kentucky prioritize opportunities for partnerships and grassroots activities in the community. The **Youth Discussion Guide** included in the toolkit provides suggested questions and topic areas for discussion and can be used as a resource to facilitate these groups.

Any new information gleaned from these groups should be incorporated into final messaging tailored for Kentucky's *Passport* effort and used to help prioritize outreach tactics presented in this plan. While the core messages in this plan have been drafted and tailored based on our deep knowledge of the target audience and the issue, they do not include critical input garnered from research with Kentucky youth and influencers.

- **Partner engagement:** Kentucky should immediately engage potential Phase One partners, many of whom already have relationships with the state. The state should convene a *Passport* Advisory Council made up of the Council of Postsecondary Education, the Department of Education, statewide partners and advocacy groups or organizations such as the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence with a stake in the issue. Quarterly meetings could serve to update the group on outreach activities and events, identify opportunities for program expansion and additional funding sources, or discuss legislative measures that may affect campaign tactics or messages.
- **Web site content:** Developing youth-focused content for the Web portal prior to the launch of a *Passport* effort will be critical for reaching at-risk students and convincing them that this initiative is new and different from other dropout prevention efforts. Along with infusing your site with the *Passport* youth-focused messages, **Kentucky should also work to ensure that the content is relevant, fun, engaging, and supportive for students**. The site should include bright imagery, clear language, and tangible materials that students might download and customize for their needs. Key tools might include:
 - An easy-to-follow checklist of graduation requirements
 - A menu of easy-to-access support tools like guidance counselors and mentors
 - A listing of community partners and specific information about the support services they provide
 - A calendar of events, such as scheduled homework help sessions, job shadowing, career fairs, or important dates like mid-term exams

- Personal portfolios or accounts for saving key information like class schedules, career information, etc.

With a robust Web site, Kentucky's *Passport* effort will be seen as more credible by influencers and the media. To that end, if Kentucky has the capacity, consider creating a section for partners and the media that includes basic materials on the *Passport* effort, including: a campaign fact sheet; ideas for getting involved; frequently asked questions (FAQs); statistics associated with the opportunities and consequences of graduating high school vs. dropping out; relevant news clippings; and links to existing Web sites, support services, or information within the state that complement the *Passport* initiative.

- Internal communications: In order to assist at-risk students and provide them with encouragement as well as needed resources to help them graduate, Kentucky should develop training tools and provide professional development opportunities for school-level staff who will be critical to this effort. These staff members should understand the needs of at-risk students and be aware of the *Passport* messages and materials available to help the students stay on track toward graduation.
- Printing and distribution of creative materials: As part of the *Passport* toolkit, SGA will provide Kentucky with customizable creative templates. Prior to the launch of the campaign, Kentucky should customize these materials as necessary to include the GoHigherKY.org URL (or ghost page URL, if possible) and logo, and determine materials needs for printing and distribution for use by participating schools and partners.
- Direct outreach to key stakeholders: Designed to coincide with the launch of the campaign, additional materials should be developed to directly reach key stakeholders within the state. While the news release and media coverage will be important components of the communications strategy, a personalized letter or other message about the campaign can be an effective way to establish and build working relationships and should be sent to potential partners, including education, faith, business, and government leaders, as well as advocacy organizations and associations. It should include information about the campaign and its goals, as well as information about opportunities for stakeholders to become engaged.
- Pre-campaign evaluation: Before launching the campaign, it will be critical to assess the extent to which existing communications vehicles (e.g., GoHigherKY.org, etc.) are being utilized by your target audiences. If this information is recorded before the launch of the communications effort, Kentucky will be able to measure the progress made in reaching at-risk youth by comparing early figures against new data collected throughout the initiative.

Campaign Launch

Once Kentucky has conducted research with the target audience, honed the core messages, refined communications materials, and engaged a roster of partners for Phase One, it should formally launch the campaign. We recommend that Kentucky launch the effort with a press event to generate news coverage and reach families, influencers, potential partners, and other stakeholders. Speakers at the event could

include local officials such as the governor and state superintendent, as well as campaign partners, P-16 council leadership, and others. At the event, the state can lay out the scope of the problem, discuss the goals of the campaign, present new creative materials, introduce campaign partners, and highlight plans for the statewide rollout. Ideally, the launch would coincide with the start of the new school year. Template talking points and press materials are included in the toolkit.

Target Audience and Messengers

As noted above, the **target audience for Phase One** are students at high schools in **Jefferson and Fayette counties as well as Northern Kentucky Council of Partners and Hazard Community and Technical College GEAR UP schools.**

In addition, the state should identify and reach out to trusted messengers or influencers who can connect with students on a personal level and facilitate the **one-on-one relationships** necessary to provide the support and attention these at-risk students need to stay in school and achieve at high levels. These influencers include parents, peers, teachers, counselors, and faith and business leaders who play an important role in connecting the relevance of school to future success. Outreach to these influencers will be facilitated through key partnerships, discussed below.

Partnerships and Grassroots Outreach

During Phase One, that the state should reach out to and engage partners with whom it has an existing relationship. Ideally, these partners have the ability and resources to communicate with students one-on-one and provide at-risk students with a support system to help them graduate from high school. Partner activities will play an important role in reaching students and their influencers at the grassroots level. Key partnerships could include:

- **Phase One schools:** The pilot school districts are arguably the most important partners in this phase of the campaign. Buy-in from principals, school superintendents and other education leadership will be invaluable to the success of the overall program. In addition, we recommend reaching out to specific school groups or clubs to help further peer-to-peer engagement, such as school newspapers, tutoring programs, and Junior ROTC.

Also look for **in-school opportunities where *Passport* messages can be reinforced and materials can be displayed** on a daily basis. This could include sending materials home with students, hosting an all-school assembly focused on the issue, posting signage in school buses, in the gym, on the athletic fields, on ticket stubs, in hallways, on book covers, on cafeteria tray liners or in the student newspaper, as well as a banner on the school Web site.

- **Family Resource and Youth Service Centers:** Mandated by KERA, Family Resource and Youth Service Centers help to address nonacademic problems that interfere with student performance and achievement by providing a range of services such as employment training, drug and alcohol counseling and referrals to health and social services. We recommend working closely with centers in the pilot areas to train counselors on *Passport* messaging and make materials available for display and distribution to students and parents.

- **Kentucky Scholars/Partnership for Successful Schools:** The Kentucky Scholars program works to promote rigorous course-taking and prepare students for success in the new economy. Local business leaders deliver important messages through presentations to eighth and ninth grade students, connecting coursework choices now to future success in college and work. We recommend working with Kentucky Scholars and the Partnership for Successful Schools to expand this effort to reach students in all pilot school districts, focusing on at-risk high school youth. *Passport* materials can be distributed at volunteer presentations to reinforce key messages and drive additional students to the Web portal.
- **GEAR UP:** The Kentucky GEAR UP program has laid an impressive foundation for reaching key stakeholders to reach youth and their influencers. In addition to the GEAR UP area coordinated through Hazard Community and Technical College, we recommend working with all GEAR UP schools in the identified target areas where GEAR UP school coordinators can provide one-on-one interaction with students. Kentucky should also tap into any GEAR UP community networks—including parent, faith, and business networks—that have been developed in the target areas.

GEAR UP coordinators can deliver messages to students as they provide one-on-one mentoring services and promote the information and resources available at GoHigherKY.org. GEAR UP coordinators should also incorporate peer-to-peer engagement, such as reaching out to specific school clubs and tutoring groups. We recommend that Kentucky develop and regularly provide content to a GEAR UP newsletter—including drop-in articles about the *Passport* initiative (template articles are provided in the toolkit)—to reach partner organizations and parents.

- **Greater Louisville, Inc.:** Greater Louisville, Inc., the chamber of commerce and economic development agency for the region, has demonstrated a clear commitment to education in the metro area. Through the organization's Partnership for Education initiative, important steps have been taken to increase student achievement. We recommend working with the organization to raise Kentucky's dropout problem as an agenda item for the committee/Education Taskforce, incorporate *Passport* messages in their communications with local stakeholders (parents, students, business and community leaders), and gain access to their members. *Passport* information can then be distributed to employees—many of whom are parents of students in the target audience—through paycheck stuffers, internal communications, and informal meetings to discuss the issue and direct engagement with students can be encouraged through job shadowing and mentor programs.
- **Kentucky School Counselor Association:** Building on work in schools, Phase One offers an opportunity to expand this reach through larger education-related organizations and their networks. School counselors are another avenue for communicating with students in a meaningful way—particularly in non-GEAR UP schools. The Kentucky School Counselor Association can disseminate *Passport* materials and communicate messages effectively to professional school counselors in the pilot phase and throughout the state.

In addition to forming the above partnerships in Phase One, Kentucky should begin to identify a core set of partners for Phase Two of the campaign (see [page 18](#) for recommendations) and introduce these organizations to the *Passport* initiative.

Earned Media Outreach

As noted above, ongoing earned media outreach will be an important component of keeping the issue in front of influencers, partners, and other stakeholders. Outreach should include editorial board meetings, interviews with *Passport* spokespeople, and a campaign op-ed submitted by a local business partner or economic development representative that highlights the importance of education in developing a talented workforce or the role of the business community in partnering with education leadership on the issue.

Online Portal: GoHigherKY.org

GoHigherKY.org provides students with the tools and resources they need to explore careers, learn about educational requirements and find the post-secondary opportunity that works best for them. As Kentucky's Web portal evolves, we **recommend creating additional content** and opportunities to build a dynamic portal that will engage students. These recommendations are based on our knowledge of the target audience and a review of the current GoHigherKY.org site. The following recommendations can be developed and launched as both resources and time allow:

- Find ways to **incorporate the student voice—teens respond well to user-generated content**. While the site provides a lot of valuable information, there are not many opportunities for students to interact directly with the Web site or offer their own content. To this end, Kentucky could identify one or two students in each of the pilot districts to submit blog-like entries to be posted to the Web site. Entries can focus on elements of the campaign's core messages, obstacles and challenges that students face in school, and highlight their personal action plans for graduating ready for college and work. By identifying multiple, specific students at the pilot schools, entries can be reviewed and approved prior to posting and can be updated frequently, giving students yet another reason to return to the site.
- Allow personal account holders to create **online “communities” based on interests, high schools, classroom subjects**, etc. Posts to chat rooms can be placed in queue and monitored for content by a third party. Only acceptable submissions would be posted to the chat boards. While it takes away from the immediacy of the posting, it will encourage students to visit the site again to see if and when their content has been added.
- Distribute **e-newsletters** that focus on specific topics once or twice each semester. The newsletter could also highlight incentives, winners and recent blog entries.
- Add an **online support or mentor center** where students can submit questions; or hold online chats about graduation requirements, homework, planning for classes or a Q&A with Kentucky Scholars volunteers.

Evaluation

As stated previously, evaluation is a critical component of a communications campaign, providing insight into effective outreach activities and messages. During Phase One, the state should set **short-term benchmarks** for success and consistently measure and evaluate based on those benchmarks, which can include:

- An increase in the number of students that visit the Web portal
- An increase in the number of students from the pilot districts who create personal profiles at GoHigherKY.org
- Success of engaging active partners in the community

A survey of students could be prepared to gauge which communications vehicles students have responded to best. This survey could be administered in school or on the Web site. By this point, Kentucky should have a good sense of which outreach activities and messages best motivate students to utilize the information and resources available to help them graduate from high school. This information should be used to refine messages and tactics as the program expands to additional schools.

At the end of Phase One, we recommend that Kentucky hold a retreat or meeting with the *Passport* Advisory Council to discuss outreach tactics employed during Phase One, review benchmarks and progress in reaching at-risk students, and set campaign goals for Phase Two.

Phase Two: Targeted Rollout

The second phase of the campaign will aim to replicate proven, effective tactics and messages to reach students in additional districts with similar performance challenges. Ideally, these districts would be diverse in geography and demography, be located in communities with a strong regional chamber of commerce or economic development group, include schools with strong support from education leadership in the district, including school principals, and a solid community partner such as the Boys & Girls Club or YMCA/YWCA to promote one-on-one interaction and communication with at-risk youth.

It will be important in all phases of the campaign to refine core messages based on lessons learned. Informal message testing—via the Web portal or group discussions—can help determine if there are unique differences between students in urban and rural communities. Any feedback from informal testing should be reflected in the campaign materials and used to prioritize outreach tactics in Phase Two. Outreach activities and partnerships initiated in Phase One should continue at the pilot schools while expanding to new communities.

Target Audience and Messengers

As with all phases of the campaign, the *Passport* audiences are students at risk of dropping out of high school and their immediate influencers. The **Phase Two audiences will be determined by the state and will include additional high schools with performance challenges similar to those in Fayette and Jefferson counties.** As noted above, districts could include Murray, Paducah, and Pike County, among others.

Reaching **trusted influencers** and messengers remains an imperative.

Partnerships and Grassroots Outreach

Kentucky should **sustain the partnerships developed in Phase One while reaching out to additional partners in Phase Two that will help reach the expanded audience**. It likely will be necessary to identify broader regional or statewide partners, depending on the geographic diversity of schools in the targeted rollout. Some recommended partners to approach in Phase Two include:

- **Phase Two schools:** It will be important to work closely with principals, school superintendents, and other education leadership to ensure ongoing success of the program during Phase Two. The state should also look for unique opportunities within the school to work with student groups or clubs and to get creative and collateral materials distributed and placed throughout the school.
- **YMCA/YWCA/Boys & Girls Clubs/United Way:** We recommend working with local affiliates of national organizations that have shown commitments to this kind of work and have an existing infrastructure through which they can communicate *Passport* messages. Community organizations that reach students through after-school or other programs are an ideal partner for disseminating materials. Many organizations are regional (i.e., United Way of Eastern Kentucky, YMCA of Central Kentucky, etc.) and can be targeted based on the location of Phase One and Phase Two schools.
- **Kentucky League of Cities:** The Kentucky League of Cities represents more than 400 cities and municipalities across the state. Charged with providing a number of resources to city employees and others, the League will be an important partner for reaching city employees—many of whom may be parents of at-risk youth—with messages and materials that reinforce the *Passport* effort. In addition, organization representatives can be activated as messengers for the *Passport* initiative and community venues can be offered up for speaking engagements or meetings.
- **Kentucky Chamber of Commerce:** Like Greater Louisville, Inc., the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce will prove invaluable in opening the door to large, statewide and local businesses in target areas throughout the state. Businesses can reach both students and their influencers through internal and external communications opportunities including paycheck stuffers, company e-mails, signage, materials distribution, job shadowing, mentor programs, and internships.
- **Faith community:** The faith community continues to play an important role in reaching both students and their influencers. Messages from the pulpit and in less formal weekly meetings will resonate strongly with the target audience. We recommend conducting outreach to governing bodies and local congregations alike to get *Passport* messages posted in public spaces, placed in weekly bulletins, and discussed in sermons.
- **State and local businesses/employers:** As noted in Phase One, the business community's reach is two-fold—to students who frequent local business locations or can benefit from career opportunities and to parents or other influencers who

may be employed by local businesses. Kentucky should identify two to three local and/or state-based employers (including local and state governments) and work with them to promote the initiative through internal and external communications channels, where applicable. Local employers can use internal communications channels such as e-mails, newsletters, and paycheck stuffers to alert their employees (many of whom are parents of the student target audience) about the tools and resources available through the *Passport* initiative. They can also reach students directly through mentoring programs in school, job shadowing or internship opportunities.

Outreach to businesses and other employers in Phase Two could include teen “hang outs” like the mall or movie theaters or locally-based restaurants such as Texas Roadhouse.

- **State agencies:** State agencies are natural partners to support a statewide initiative, reaching stakeholders and policymakers as well as the residents they serve. We recommend that the state reach out to the local transportation authority (where applicable) which can work to place public service announcements or paid advertising on bus routes and local housing authorities to make *Passport* messages and materials available to many low-income families.

Proven partnerships from Phase One should be expanded with similar organizations that serve students in targeted Phase Two schools. In addition, it will be necessary to begin outreach to larger statewide partners such as restaurants, retailers, and the media to lay the foundation for partner activities in Phase Three.

Distribution of Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

Given that the *Passport* initiative is state-based and speaks to an issue of importance to the broader community, print and broadcast creative submitted as public service announcements to media outlets across the state will be well received. To that end, GMMB has developed template radio scripts and print creative which are provided in the *Passport to Opportunity* Action Toolkit.

To increase overall awareness of the effort, the state should reach out to public service and community affairs directors at print and radio outlets across Kentucky, brief them on the *Passport* effort, and provide tailored PSAs for their use. Radio stations are most popular with youth, while print outlets like the *Louisville Courier-Journal* are better for reaching influencers. A brief list of top media outlets is provided below:

- **Radio – Youth**
 - WGZB-FM (urban contemporary)
 - WZKF-FM (contemporary hits)
 - WKFS-FM (contemporary hits)
 - WLFT-FM (contemporary hits)
- **Radio – Adults**
 - WHAS-AM (news/talk)
 - WAMZ-FM (country)
 - WMJM-FM (urban adult contemporary)
 - WLW-AM (news)

- **Newspapers**
Louisville Courier-Journal
Lexington Herald-Leader

Earned Media Outreach

Throughout the *Passport* initiative, Kentucky should continue to conduct media outreach to generate news coverage of the effort in order to reach influencers, potential partners, community leaders and others. During Phase Two, the “news hook” should have a stronger focus on research findings and progress of the initiative. In addition, Kentucky may have personal stories of students who were affected by the campaign, accessed the supports available to them, and decided to stay in school. These stories of success should be pitched to the media.

Online Portal

During Phase Two, Kentucky should continue to **update and refresh content** on the site so that it remains relevant and interesting to students, particularly those who may have been introduced to the site in the younger grades and are now closer to graduation. The state should incorporate additional recommendations from Phase One if they have not already been added to the site, focusing on youth-generated content and interactivity. The state may also benefit from surveying or convening a group of users to brainstorm ideas for new content, tools, resources, and activities.

Evaluation

Kentucky should continue to evaluate the success of the communications plan using short-term communications benchmarks. The larger target audience will serve to provide even more **feedback on the messages and tactics** that resonate with at-risk youth and their influencers. In Phase Two, the state should use measures such as:

- Increase in number of students visiting the Web portal
- Increase in the number of students from the target schools who create personal profiles at GoHigherKY.org
- Success of engaging active partners in the community
- Increase in overall awareness of campaign messages

At the end of Phase Two, Kentucky has the potential to have a strong group of active partners and core grassroots activities in place that reach students via one-on-one interaction, along with an engaging Web portal to provide information and resources to help at-risk youth graduate from high school prepared for some form of post-secondary education or work. Kentucky should also be ready to activate statewide partners in Phase Three, having laid the groundwork in Phase Two.

Prior to statewide expansion, Kentucky should engage the *Passport* Advisory Council to prioritize outreach tactics, identify potential partners, review benchmarks, and set goals for Phase Three. In addition, the Council should discuss plans to sustain the campaign over the long term.

Phase Three: Statewide Rollout

Kentucky should use Phase Three of the communications campaign to leverage the **most effective tactics and outreach activities** from Phases One and Two, inciting action and creating real change. The state should focus on planned activities that foster one-on-one communication while expanding to statewide grass tops efforts that reach an even broader audience. While short-term goals will still be key indicators of success for schools introduced to the campaign in Phases Two and Three, longer term, school-based measures (e.g., the numbers of students enrolling in more rigorous courses or promotion and graduation rates can be used to gauge success among students attending pilot high schools.

Target Audience and Messengers

In this phase, the campaign should aim to **reach all at-risk youth** and their influencers throughout the state; the effort should be scalable to all low-performing schools by Phase Three.

Influencers, including parents, peers, teachers, counselors, librarians, faith, and business leaders, will continue to be an important audience as the effort reaches additional schools.

Partnerships and Grassroots Outreach

In Phase Three, Kentucky should form partnerships with **organizations that have broad reach** throughout the state, such as media outlets, retailers, restaurant chains, and outdoor vendors. At the same time, partnerships formed in Phases One and Two that continue to amplify campaign messages through one-on-one communications should be sustained and expanded. Specific organizations to approach for activities conducted in Phase Three include:

- **Phase Three schools:** Kentucky will need to work closely with principals, school superintendents, and other education leadership to ensure ongoing success of the program during Phase Three.
- **Restaurants/fast-food chains:** Restaurants, fast-food chains, and even mall food courts provide another alternative for reaching teens. Opportunities for exposure include tray liners, in-store and tabletop displays, and food packaging. First pursue those companies that are based in Kentucky (e.g., Papa John's or Yum! Brands, which include KFC, Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell) and those with local franchises (e.g., McDonald's or Chick-Fil-A). Businesses are most likely to get involved when their participation can have a direct effect on students at risk of dropping out in their community.
- **Media outlets:** Paid advertising can be costly, but a partnership with a statewide or local media outlet can help ease the financial burden by offering reduced cost or gratis placements in print, outdoor, and broadcast outlets. The *Passport* toolkit provides template radio readers, Web banners, and outdoor public service announcements. Media partners like Comcast also may have the capability to help you produce radio and television advertising or public service announcements. Unique opportunities also can be explored with radio stations;

stations can host contests with prizes or provide student incentives like concert tickets or having a local DJ spin an all-school dance.

Earned Media Outreach

In Phase Three, Kentucky should continue outreach to newspapers, television and radio stations, and news Web sites across the state. Outreach should focus on personal stories of students from across the state. Moreover, Kentucky should encourage partners and others to submit letters to the editor or an op-ed authored by an influential partner to lay out the progress of the campaign to date. The state also should consider holding a news conference to report the progress of the campaign or issue a “report to the people” document.

Online Portal

By Phase Three of the *Passport* initiative, **messages and images from the campaign should be fully integrated into the site**. Content, tools, and resources should constantly change and evolve to provide a compelling reason for students to return to the site. Additional items for consideration include rich media games, downloadable video and audio clips, screensavers, cell phone backgrounds, and other customizable materials.

Evaluation

Kentucky should continue to evaluate the *Passport* initiative based on measures for schools introduced to the campaign in Phases One and Two, such as Web site usage, numbers of engaged partners, and students utilizing available resources.

It is important to note that the communications campaign is only one of many factors that can influence a student’s decision to remain in high school. At the same time, it will be worth reviewing new graduation and dropout rates as the campaign progresses and providing those results to stakeholders and partners to continue to reinforce the importance of the work.

Additional Outreach Activities

The most meaningful way to reach youth at risk of dropping out of high school is through one-on-one communication—direct outreach to students or outreach to trusted influencers like parents and counselors. The three-phased *Passport* plan focuses on tactics that meet this goal, but there are also a number of other ways to create a “buzz” and raise awareness of the issue and the brand. These activities should be incorporated into the integrated plan to supplement targeted outreach activities, where possible, but should not take the place of the personal communications tactics laid out in Phases One through Three. Activities that can help Kentucky convey campaign messages to a broader audience include:

- **Statewide research** to understand the progress of the campaign and overall awareness among at-risk students and their influencers throughout Kentucky. Formal focus groups would also help inform revisions to messages and materials as the campaign evolves in future phases. Research results can be publicized through outreach to targeted media outlets.
- **Annual or large-scale earned media events** to reinforce *Passport* messages in the news. These events are another venue to release statewide research about the effectiveness of the campaign, showcase its progress, and honor high school

graduates or partners, among others. The annual event can provide a time for Kentucky's target audience, partners, and stakeholders to become reacquainted with the communications effort and stated goals. Moreover, it would provide a yearly news hook for greater outreach across the state.

- **Retailers:** Teens consume more than 8.5 hours of media a day, including TV, music, video/computer games or movies. Retailers such as Wal-Mart, Best Buy, and Target that sell these products; rental chains like Blockbuster; or movie theaters are prime locations to reach the teen audience. Retailers can produce in-store signage, include messaging on receipts and product packaging. They are also a good place to reach parents of at-risk youth who may be employed by these businesses. Partnerships with local outlets of nationwide companies can be extremely successful, but many take persistence and dedication to execute. It is important that Kentucky set their partnership priorities and begin laying the groundwork for these partnerships early.
- **Partnership with a local grocery store:** Grocery stores such as Food City or Kroger present another opportunity to reach students and their influencers with *Passport* messages. Awareness opportunities include in-store signage, food packaging (e.g., milk cartons, cereal boxes, etc.), point-of-purchase displays, and employee communications.
- **Produce a television advertisement** or public service announcement. While the initial investment can be expensive, there are a range of options for placing the ad once it has been produced. For example: if resources are not available to place it as paid advertising, distribute the ad as a public service announcement to local broadcast outlets or cable operators; place it as a movie trailer to play at teen-focused movies prior to the feature presentation; explore the opportunity to place it on the Jumbotron at professional or college sporting events attended by teens; or place it on in-store monitors at businesses such as Blockbuster.

Conclusion

Kentucky is one step closer to helping students graduate from high school ready for college and work with the inclusion of the *Passport to Opportunity* initiative. By implementing this integrated communications effort to make students and their influencers aware of the information and resources available to help them graduate from high school, Kentucky can reach students via one-on-one outreach as well as through a broader network of partners. By continuing to employ the tactics presented in this plan, including research, message and communications tools refinement, partnerships, interactive development, and evaluation, Kentucky can establish a "culture of achievement" in which all students believe they can and should graduate from high school ready for college and the workforce.

¹ "The manufacturing sector is unique in that it has historically provided 'good' jobs—employment at relatively high wages with good benefits—while being accessible to workers with lower educational attainment...The role of education in the Southern economy is dynamic. One side of the argument has been given: lower levels of education quality are a major determinant of lower incomes. At the same time, a lack of high-paying jobs demanding educated workers reduces the returns to education for Southern workers. This creates a disincentive to invest in education, and also creates an incentive for those who do become well-educated to migrate to other areas of the country where there are higher paying jobs and greater demand for educated workers." ("A Profile of the Southern Economy: Living Standards, Economic Structure, and Lower Income Workers." The Southern Institute (2003). [<http://www.thesoutherninstitute.org/pdf/SBLC%20USC%20Full%20Report.pdf>])

² The South has shifted from a farm-and-factory economy to the new-new economy that rewards thinking, team-work, entrepreneurial skills and learning over a lifetime. The South needs schools aligned with the demands of an economy driven by technology and globalization, and schools that hold high expectations of their students." ("New Traditions: Options for Rural High School Excellence." Southern Governors Association (2004).)

³ For instance, a South Carolina poll found that four out of five parents said they were satisfied with the learning environment at their child's school. ("Results of the 2003 Education Survey." South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (2004). [<http://www.sceoc.com/PDF/ResultsofParentSurvey2003.doc>])

⁴ Graduation rates declined between 1991 and 2002 in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia. They increased in Louisiana and Maryland. ("Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991–2002."Manhattan Institute (2005).)

⁵ Kaiser Family Foundation. "Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds," 2005.

